



Not Lost in Translation: Culture, Identity and Odia Issues in the Translations of Himansu Sekhar Mohapatra

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Abstract— Translation involves both the human factor and the language. By human factor we mean the political, social, gender-based identity along with the ethical, moral judgments. The moral stands stem from person's experience of various socio-cultural phenomenon and events. When such stands lead to stereotypical mindset on the parts of translator, the norms and regulations of translation come handy to save the day. As culture and norms are two different domains there are instances of conflict between them. A good translator always strikes a balance between the two. Of late literary translation has been a vehicle for transmission of own culture, identity and issues. Translation is being used as a metaphorical passport for transporting the indigenous culture from margin to the centre through text. A study of translated works from 1995s till 2010 in Odisha saw a surge of exotropic translation when more than 100 texts were translated from Odia to English. Himansu S. Mohapatra rightly points out, "there are so many ways in which translation can mirror the layered nature of culture." (Mohapatra, 91-92). This paper synoptically analyses the corpus of translation done by Himansu Sekhar Mohapatra and how as a contemporary translator he values his own culture and establishes it in global forum. Being a professor of English he is cautious of norms and principles of translation, at the same time as an Odia he goes extra mile to preserve the original meanings, emotions and ethos not being lost in translation.



Keywords— Translation, Culture, Identities, Odia Issues

Introduction

The evolution of the Odia identity, rooted in the rich cultural tapestry of the Indian state of Odisha, has been profoundly shaped by a myriad of social movements spanning linguistic, cultural, political, and social spheres. These movements, each with its unique contours, have not only fortified the distinctiveness of the Odia identity but have also been instrumental in fostering a sense of unity, pride, and resilience among the people. The linguistic movement, which gained momentum in the early 20th century, sought the recognition and promotion of the Odia language, playing a pivotal role in shaping a linguistic identity. Translation was a part of part of the linguistic movement for which some texts got translated from different Indian languages into Odia which unequivocally helped the Odia movement in early nineties. These translations include Krittibas Nanda Sharma's translation of

Mahatma Gandhi's Hind Swaraj which was published by Utkal Sahitya Press, Cuttack in the year 1921 and the publication of translation of a book on the freedom movement by Gopal Krishna Gokhael in 1923 reinforced the spirit of freedom of Odisha from Bengali dominance.

Earlier translation in Odisha used to be a form of cultural practice. However, of late the *who*, the *what*, the *for whom* and the *how* has changed. For some translators, translation has been a political rhetoric. They glorify the politics involved at the cost of one's ethnicity, identity and culture so jeopardizing one's civilization at large. Unbiased and apolitical translation is the requirement of the day in order to restore the lost glory.

Resurgence of Translation: Furthering Odia identity

Before delving into principal argument of the paper let's have a glimpse of history of translation in

Odisha. The resurgence of translation within the context of Odisha has been a transformative force, intricately weaving the threads of tradition and heritage into the fabric of the Odia identity through the text. At the heart of this resurgence were endeavors to resurrect and preserve classical and antique documents that had, over time, faced the threat of neglect. Literary luminaries, artists, and enthusiasts played a pivotal role in breathing new life into them ensuring their continuity and relevance in contemporary times. This revival not only preserved literary and cultural treasures but also laid the foundation for a distinct cultural identity that resonates with the people of Odisha. It enriched the literary landscape and contributed to a sense of linguistic pride, reinforcing the Odia identity through written expression. Hence translation played a pivotal role in preservation, circulation and dissemination of Odia knowledge system creating a harmonious blend of the old and the new.

A concise history of translation in Odisha would acquaint us with the rise of translation in Odisha. Prior to 1867, some four works of translation into Oriya had been published. Three of these were Christian religious text and the fourth one was an administrative text. The Period from 1867-1868 can be considered as the period of resurgence in translation. There was obvious growth in number of texts getting translated. To quote translator and translation historian Paul St-Pierre, this period saw the surge of translation, “a total of eleven translations into Oriya appeared, all in Orissa. They focused on the principal concerns and interests of the time: education, religion and administration.” (St-Pierre, 58) These translated texts were chosen as the text books for the schools. So much so that Fakir Mohan Senapati the famous 19th century writer was awarded a sum of thousand rupees for his translation of Bharat barshar Itihas (A History of India).

Exotropic Translations in Odisha

The popularity of exotropic translation is often attributed to the publication of English translation of classic Odia novel of Fakir Mohan Senapati “Chha Mana Atha Guntha” into *Six Acres and a Third* in the year 2005 and published by University of California Press. Since then such translations flourished in Odisha. The renowned translators include Jatindra K Nayak, Bikram K Das, Snehaprava Das, Lipipuspa Nayak, Mary Mohanty, Ashok Mohanty, Supriya Kar, Kamalakant Mohapatra to name a few along with Paul St. Piere as a collaborator with some of them. They have undertaken the translations of often regarded greatest Odia classics like *Chha Mana Atha Guntha*, *Mamu*, *Prayaschita*, *Paraja*, *Amrutara Santan*, *Dana Pani*, *Dadi Budha*, *Jantra Rudha*, *Desha Kala Patra* etc. These classics have established Odia literature in global forum- its identity, variety and magnitude. These works have secured unique

place in Indian academia under the banner either of post colonial studies or of Indian classics in translations. Scholars take immense benefit in their research from these translated texts. Some translators are even obsessive to translate the already translated canonical works. There is no harm in doing so, in finding out the gaps in earlier translations but the attempt is directed to gain immediate fame and recognition these canonical texts offer. However these canonical texts do not form the entirety of Odia literature. There are still some worthy texts unexplored and thus buried in the course of time without getting an outlet to flourish. In this critical juncture where some precious non-canonical texts have received little attention from the translators, hence marginalized, the intervention of Himansu Sekhar Mohapatra as a translator provides an attempt to holistic understanding of Odia literature vis-a-vis Odia identity and culture.

Translator as torch bearer: The Translations of Himansu Sekhar Mohapatra

Translation is a matter of personal choice. One can ascribe many reasons to selection of a text for translation. Certain situation compels the translators to take up the case. Translator selects a text at particular point in time, which is considered culturally or socially significant, or canonical. Sometimes he values a text due to his personal equation with the author or as a part of assignment offered to him by any agency. A real translator, a torch bearer of translation becomes the voice of good but marginalized texts. He often transcends the shackles and establishes an important text through his translation which does not form the part of cannon. By way of inserting marginal texts into the cultural space of the centre, a true translator preserves the identity, transmits the culture and raises the Odia issues.

In this critical juncture, Himansu Sekhar Mohapatra appears in the field of translation as a translator in the year 2019 with the publication of the novel *Basanti* by Oxford University Press. Although he is not new to the field of translation- as a professor he has produced some PhD scholars in this field and has published research papers in renowned international journals but new as a translator, his first translation became an instant hit for the choice of the unique collaborative novel written by nine writers. Of course the theme of 19th century feminism grabbed the positive attention of readers and reviewers.

The corpus of Mohapatra’s translation is not very large; however, they are exclusive from the point of view of theme and choice of subject matter. Some of his significant translations in collaboration with Paul St-Pierre include *Basanti: Writing the New Woman* (2019) written by Annada Shankar Ray, et al., *Letters to Jorina: A Novel* (2021) by Ganeswar Mishra, *Battles of Our Own* (2022) by Jagadish

Mohanty, *Following My Heart* (2023) by Jyotindra Mohan Joardar and his own translation include *The Life and Times of Banka Harichandan* (2023) written originally in Odia by Dipti Ranjan Pattanaik.

In this paper I would analyse the above novels one by one what made Mohapatra to undertake the above projects. Giving a bird's eye view of the plot we would discover the latent qualities of the texts that became head turner for the translator.

Basanti: Writing the New Woman (Basanti)

Basanti is a revolutionary collaborative novel written by nine authors (Annada Shankar Roy et al.) with a challenging theme of women's emancipation set in a conservative 19th century Odia society. The eponymous character becomes vocal for gender equality and scribes it in an Odia magazine causing discontent with her husband Debartra and eventual separation. Somdatta Mandal rightly points out, "Basanti, the protagonist of the novel is a misfit in conservative, pre-Independence rural Odisha not only because she reads and writes on her own choice, but also because she marries out of love a man not belonging to her own caste and in spite of confronting regular conflicts with her conservative mother-in law, manages to run a girls' school in the village."

This radical experimentation of novel writing and choice of unconventional theme of women's emancipation through education drew the attention of the translator to work on such great but marginalized text. By giving life to Basanti in English, the translator furthers the Odia women's issue during 19th century and brings it to global lime light.

Letters to Jorina (Chithi Jorina Pain)

Letters to Jorina is a chronicle of East-West divide. The author (Ganeswar Mishra) who is known for creating characters rooted in Odia society and culture has certainly introduced Alok Das, a cosmopolitan protagonist who negotiates the East-West divide. He is caught between the two worlds of societal and cultural dissimilarity. He does not believe in the idea of East and West as portrayed by Kipling in his ballad. He mourns the loss of his native land Odisha when in England and feels nostalgic of his life in England when in Odisha. Jayashree Mishra rightly points out in the review of the novel, "Told informally through eleven letters that Alok writes to his lady friend in England, Jorina McCarthy, the novel charmingly outlines the prospects and problems of our postcolonial condition."

By undertaking this text for translation Mohapatra and St-Pierre duo have done justice to it. For the translators the experience the author was undergoing was like a déjà vu. H.S. Mohapatra was a doctoral student in England and spent his life there for more than four years and Paul is a

Canadian Professor who travels almost every year to Odisha for translation since last thirty years, considers Odisha his second home.

To quote Snehaprava Das from her review

"But a work like this is in need of global visibility... The translated version reads like an original work in English. If translation is believed to be an act of linguistic bridge-building for the sake of transformational cross-cultural journey, then *Letters to Jorina* is a fine example of such a bridge."

Battles of Our Own (Nija Nija Panipath)

The novel **Battles of Our Own** claims to be an industrial novel. It portrays the life in Tarbahar colliery. Much like Western Industrial novels where the characters working in industries are under paid and dwell in cheap dilapidated buildings or in slums, the protagonist of *Battles*, Pradyumna Mishra secures a job by purchasing the identity of a tribal named Samaru Khadia and lives miserably in the house of his relative. The novel dramatizes the unholy nexus between coal mafias, management, trade union leaders and politicians leading to huge corruption and instability in the colliery.

When the proposal of translating Nija Nija Panipath was sent to Penguin, Ananya Bhatia, the editor of the project accepted it by saying; "Dear Professor Mohapatra and Professor St- Pierre, I am pleased to inform you that your proposal for the English translation of *Nija Nija Panipatha* by Jagadish Mohanty has been accepted. It is a unique and beautifully written novel that dwells on important issues and themes. It will give us great pleasure to add this significant work of Odia literature to our translation list."

The excellence of the novel in translation, *Battles of Our Own* is acknowledged by the writer and translator Jenny Bhatt who "selects five key works of South Asian literature, all historical novels available in English translation, that showcase the richness and diversity of the region's lesser known languages: from a modernist classic decrying the depredations of the coal mining industry to a 'loose, baggy monster' of a Victorian novel exploring utopian ideals."

To add another feather to the success story of the novel *Battles of Our Own* Scroll. in on the occasion of International Mother Language day offers a list of 15 Indian Language books to read in translation, and this novel features in 5th serial.

Following My Heart (Manua)

Folllowing My Heart is a translation of an Odia memoir - Manua - written by Jyotindra Mohan

Joardar. While discovering the text the translator was moved by the writing style, uninterrupted flow of images, and experiences of the writer in old capital of Odisha Cuttack or in the new capital during 1950s which have been neatly written and delivered to the public. The translator speaks about the book in the blurb,

“This account is simple and natural, informative and detailed, not the tale of successes alone but of a life lived in all its complexity, in which both women and men participate and in which day-to-day life is described in full. The author, Jyotirindra Mohan Joardar, who lived from 1914 to 2011, movingly recounts his many interests and passions, such as swimming, classical music, chess, and translation.”

Joardar may not be an acclaimed Odia writer but this memoir for the involved intensity, passion and writing style is worth to be translated and brought to attention of English reading public.

The Life and Times of Banka Harichandan (Sandigdha Saishab)

A coming of age narrative set in provincial town of Cuttack and Choudwar *The Life and Times of Banka Harichandan* tells the growing up of the protagonist Banka Harichandan through the conservative mindset of Odia society. He is caught between social norms of morality and immorality. As a child he wants to explore the freedom by hanging out with friends, smoking cigarette or watching movie but not at the cost of family honour. He refrains from the above adolescent enviable activities his friends practice. Mitra Samal rightly points out in her review “It is a gripping narrative of a typical Indian middleclass household, with its strict observances of ordinances for a rather befuddled boy Banka and I could very much relate to it.”

Choosing *Sandigdha Saishab*, a composite novel, to translate is definitely commendable job on the part of translator as the novel permeates through socio cultural membranes of present day Odisha where in the growth of an Odia bildung has succinctly been portrayed.

CONCLUSION

With the quality of translation being assured as top publishing houses like Penguin, Oxford, Simon and Schusters showing interest in his translation, I would conclude that as a translator, Himansu S Mohapatra, is becoming a trend setter in Odisha translation circle offering a complete representation of Odia literature, culture, society and identity without having any prejudice for any texts. At last, I can conclude that H S Mohapatra not being biased by any influence, luring or easy popularity does his job

dutifully as a translator for holistic depiction of Odianess, thus, he is ‘not lost in translation’.

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